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# Darrel Aune, Firemaker, Part 2; Steel

### Schwert,Outdoors1

- Gear reviews and tests - Emergency and survival -

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## Description :

Part 2 of this article covers the sharp tools made by Darrel Aune, his ulus, draw knives, knives, and awls.

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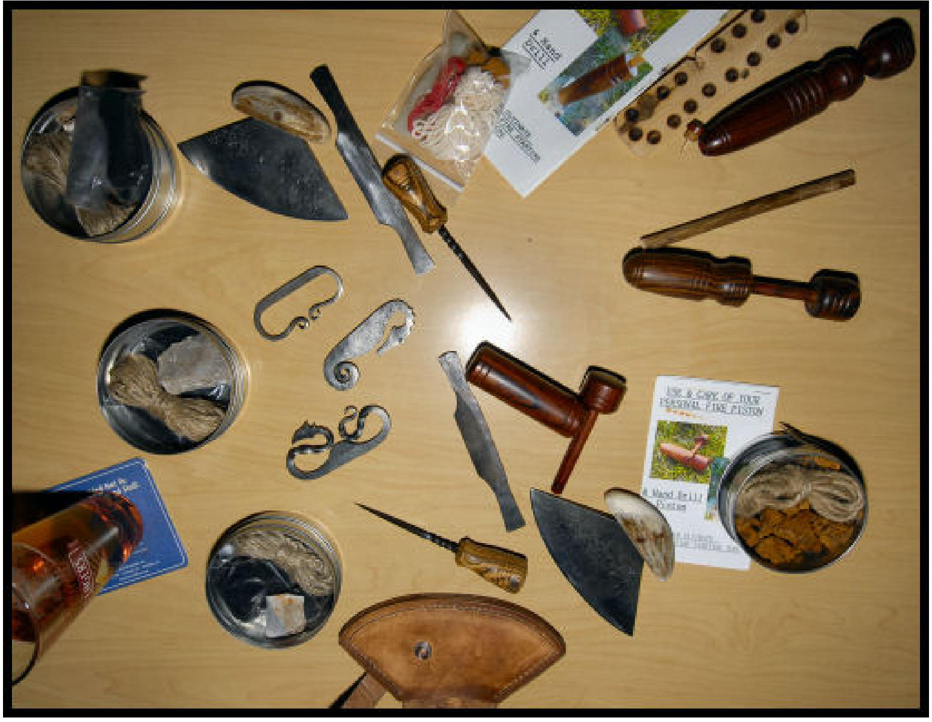
**This article, the second part of our dual authorship from Outdoors1 and Schwert, will attempt to show more of Darrel Aune's wide range of work. We met at a local pub and over pints of microbrews planned out this article. The table littered with knives, ulus, fire steels and pistons, chaga, and char, cameras and pints amazed the local populace but not nearly as much as the authors were amazed by the diversity of Darrel's tools and his obvious talent.**



**Aune Collection**

We decided to break up the tools into two piles, Outdoors1 would do the primary work on Darrel's firepistons, awls, drawknives, knife and DVD; Schwert would cover the ulus and fire steels. After we began work on this article it became apparent that we would have even split the article into two parts to adequately cover the selection of tools we had.

Part 1 of this article will look at three fire pistons and 3 forged fire steels, along with Darrel's Fire Piston DVD.

Part 2 covers a pair of nearly matching and quite unique ulus, a pair of mini drawknives, two awls, and one knife all made by Darrel Aune.

Darrel is likely a unique individual in that he makes forged knives and tools, fire steels, and wood fire pistons. His primitive interests are quite diverse and his skill at turning these interests into moderately priced and authentic items is quite impressive.

Each of us will add additional supporting comments to the tools they do not primarily cover. We hope this combined effort not only shows some of Darrel's fine work, but adds some technique differences in using these fine tools. We will identify the authorship of each section as we go. So please refer to Part 1 of this article for introductory remarks, as here, we simply continue on with Darrel's sharp tools.

# *Now for the Sharp Tools*

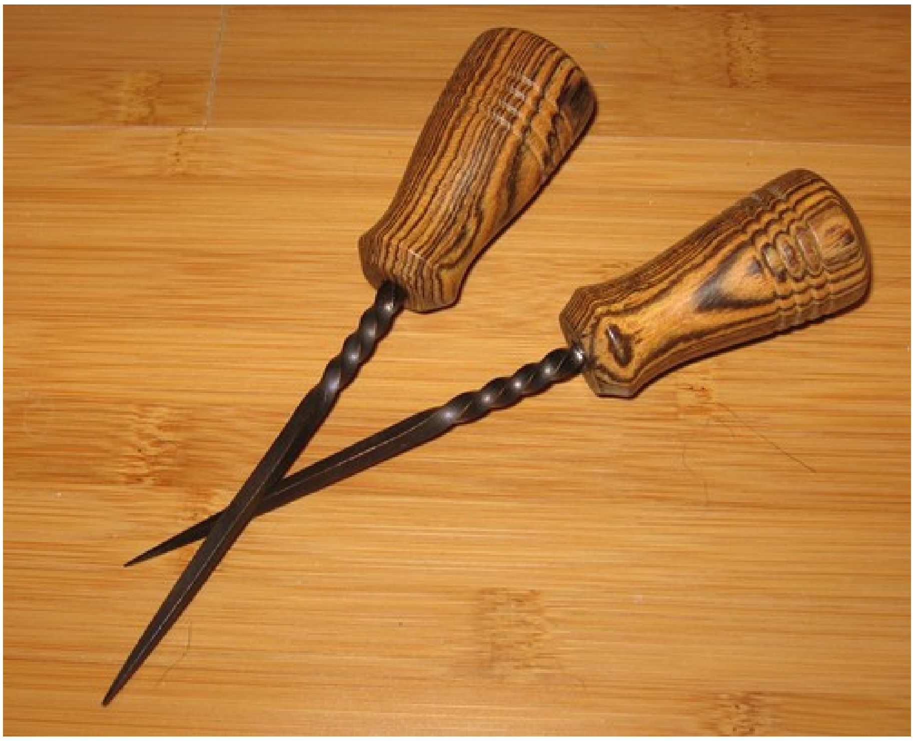
**Darrel's awl**

***Outdoors1*** The awl is an ancient tool for boring holes.  In its most basic form, the awl is simply a point for piercing and a handle to hold it by.  Awls may be constructed from whatever material is convenient - wood, bone, stone, or metal.  Throughout history, awls have been used by many professions - from woodworkers to sail makers.  The reason for this universality is the general usefulness of the awl.  Awls can make bore holes as easily as a drill, mark wood joints more precisely than a pencil, and pierce tough cloth or leather more readily than a needle.

The use of awls also spans cultures.  You will find examples from many periods in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.  Native Americans used awls for boring holes to lace canoes and for stitching moccasins.  When Europeans adapted the canoe and the moccasin, they also awls to make and maintain them.  "The Moccasins were easily made; every family had its awl for that purpose, with its buckhorn handle; and the evenings were as a rule given to this rude species of shoemaking." "History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania",  (Rev. Joseph Dodridge, 1824).  Of course, an awl was also handy for stitching together other leather goods, from hunting shirts to horse tack.

Awls vary in size and shape depending on their use.  Modern examples may be round, triangular, or square.  Tips may be pointed or chisel edged.  A round awl is best for leatherwork, as it forces the material aside without cutting the fibers.  However, for overall utility I prefer a square or triangular blade, which can cut a hole using either a push or a twist.  This makes it more useful for working wood and other materials.

Once upon a time, good awls were readily available at hardware store.  These days, the awls you find in the corner hardware store are likely to be blunt tipped and made from soft steel.  Good awls can be found in specialty woodworking or leather crafting stores, but they can be quite expensive and are frequently too large to carry readily in the field. Schwert's ulu article had given me the idea of putting together a sewing kit - something along the lines of a Native American or frontiersman's kit.  An awl is would be a necessity for this kit.  I had a pretty good idea what I wanted in a sewing awl, so I wrote off an email to Darrel who rapidly put together a fine tool for me.

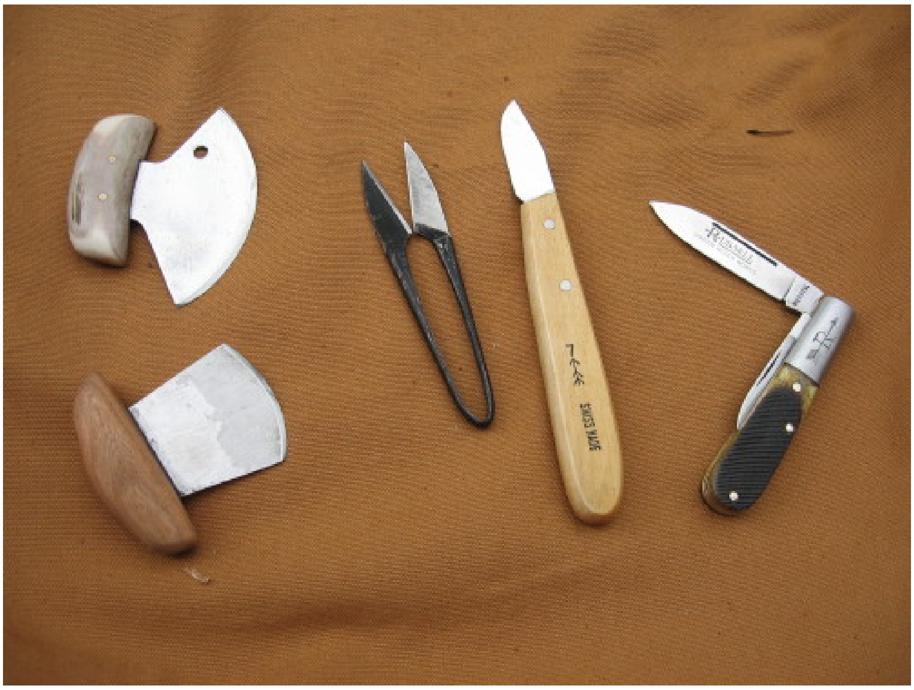


**A fine pair of awls from Darrel Aune**

Darrel's awl is small enough to be readily carried and - as you can see - quite beautiful.   The shaft of the awl is square, and had a lovely decorative twist pattern.  The point is long and fine, but it is also strong and does not bend.  The handle of Darrel's awls are lathe turned from cocobolo wood.  The narrow waist provides a place to wrap your fingers, and the rounded butt nestles into your palm.  The reeding adds a decorative element, as well as providing a secure grip.  I find that with awl handle in by palm and my index finger along the shaft, I have very fine control over this awl.  I used this fine awl became the basis for my little sewing kit, shown below.

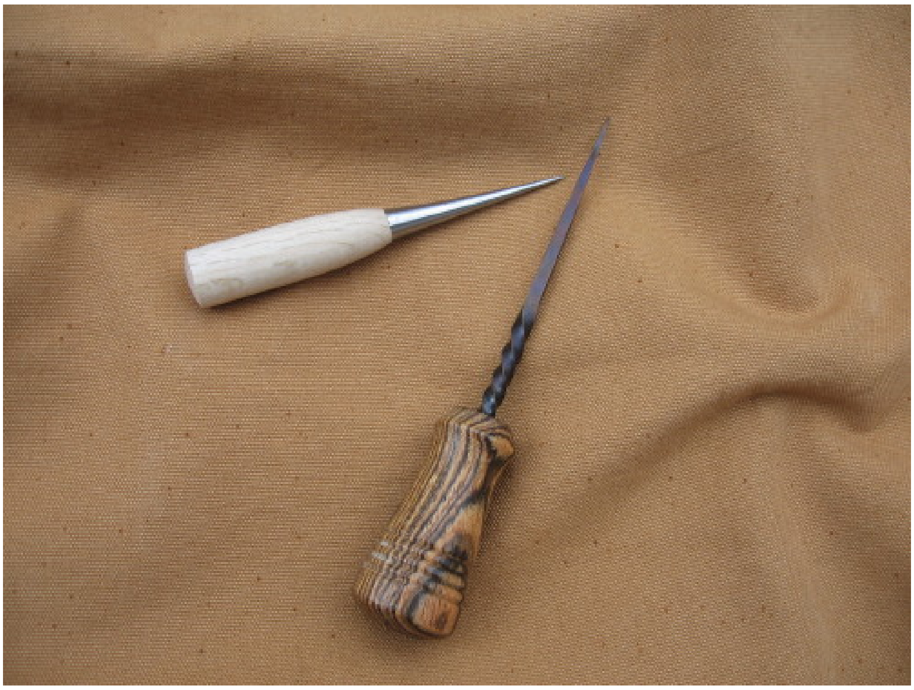
**The Sewing Kit** My sewing/repair kit has two basic types of components: tools and repair materials.  Tool needs are pretty basic.  You need something to cut the material, something to make holes, some needles for sewing, and something to protect your fingers.  Materials include patches, thread, and cord for repair.

Any of a variety of tools can cut cloth or leather.  Below is shown a small selection of cutting tools including two ulus, a small Asian style nippers, a small fixed blade carving knife, and a folding pocket knife.  While any of these tools would work for a sewing kit, I would select one of the ulus shown at left.  The upper ulu is from Maynard Linder  (see Schwert's article for review).  The strongly curved blade cuts even very heavy leather well, and the points can cut small holes for stitching if necessary.  The lower ulu was made by the author from a handsaw blade.  Its wide handle and small blade fit my hand well.  I like the Asian style snips a well, so they go along in my kit.



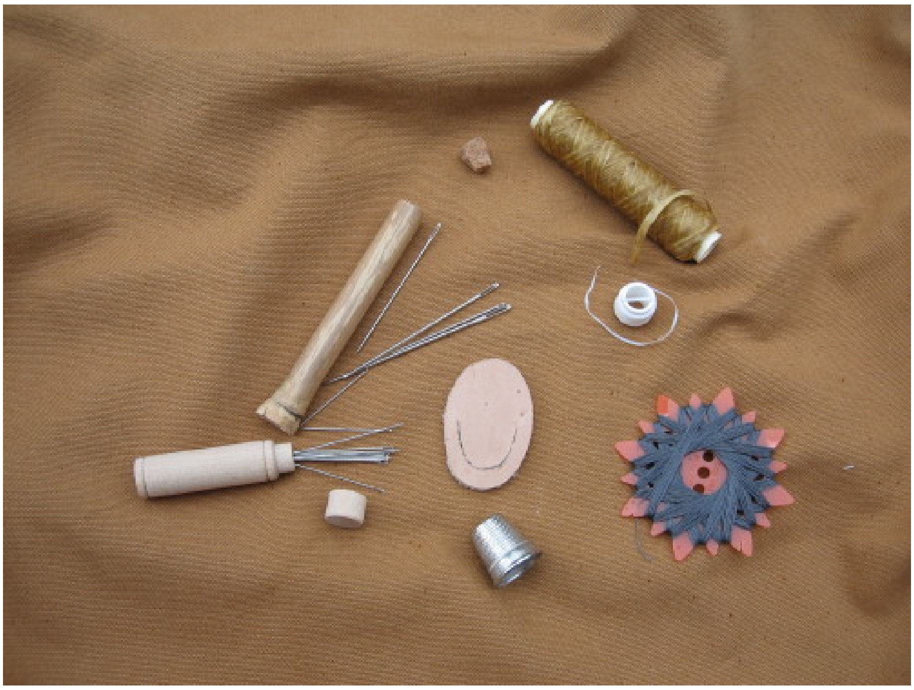
**A selection of cutting tools for the sewing kit** Two small ulus at left, a small thread snips, small carving knife and folding knife.

The tool to punch holes is of course, an awl.  I've actually selected two.  The larger awl from Darrel Aune is coupled with a small Japanese style awl.  Darrel's awl can make larger holes, and bore through wood if necessary.  The smaller Japanese awl is round bladed, and the bolstered blade is designed to be struck with a hammer.  It is a very sturdy (if somewhat plain) little awl, and makes a nice companion for Darrel's larger and more elegant awl.



**Two Awls** A small Japanese awl to the left and Darrel Aune's larger awl at right.

The next photo shows a mixture of tools and materials.  Large and small needle cases are shown to the left, two thimbles in the center (one is a flat Inuit style thimble, the other a traditional European thimble).  On the right of the photo are three types of sewing material: artificial sinew at the top; a small roll of dental floss at center, and some grey cotton thread at the bottom.  The grey cotton thread works fine for repairing most clothing, and the dental floss is excellent for heavy cloth or lighter leather.  Artificial sinew is excellent for repairs to heavy materials, and it can be separated into thinner strands for other uses.  I haven't shown them, but a small selection of buttons and safety pins is a very useful addition to this kit.



**Needles, thimbles and thread**

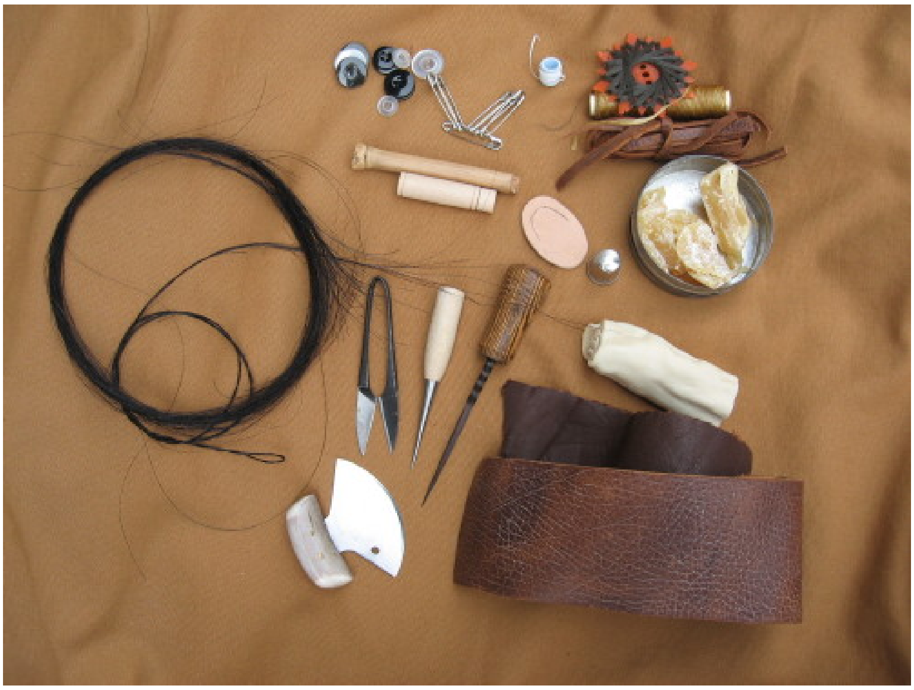
The photo below shows a variety of patching/repair materials.  The rolls to the left are strips of leather in two weights, a heavier oil tanned leather and a lighter glove weight leather.  They can be used either for patching or cut into lace or straps as shown in the photo.  A piece of rawhide (not shown) is another handy material for repairs.  On the right of the photo is a small hank of horsehair &mdash; this material can be spun into heavy thread or cord - you can see a single twisted cord in the photo.

**patching and cord** leather for patching, cut lace, and horsehair.

Finally, no repair kit is complete without two items: something to lubricate the thread and something to glue things together.  The tin in the photo shows a lump of beeswax at the top.  Beeswax is an excellent lubricant for thread and can also be used to protect the steel items in the kit from rust.  The chips in the bottom of the tin are brewer's pitch.  The pitch can be heated alone to provide a waterproof seal, or combined with beeswax and a small amount of ground charcoal to make a waterproof glue.

**Beeswax and pitch**

So, here is the final kit. A sheath for the ulu and a small bag to carry the entire kit has not yet been added.

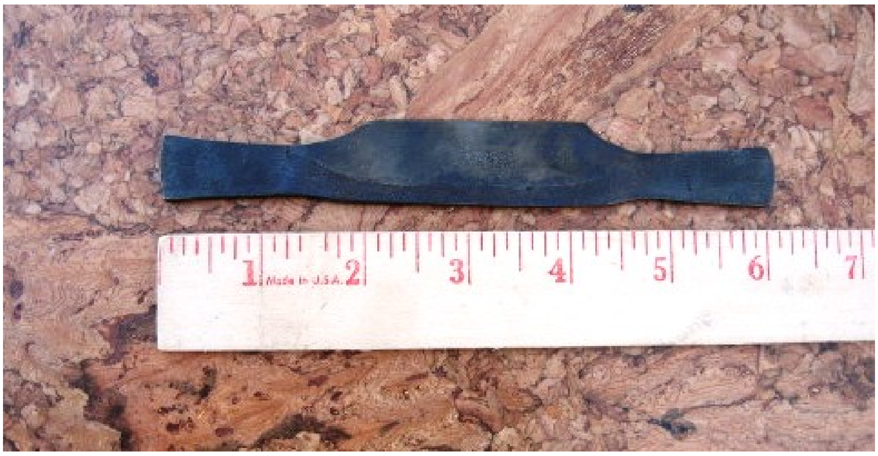


**The completed kit**

***Schwert*** As Outdoors1 and I were sitting in the pub, each pulling bits of Darrel's work from our bags, one of the awls appeared on the table. I grabbed it, in haste nearly knocking over my precious IPA, and exclaimed "I must have one of these for my repair kit", in an eyeblink the second awl appeared as a gift from Outdoors1. I was happy. My sewing kit which appears in my ulu article has an awl made from a sailmakers needle with an antler tip handle. This new awl from Darrel was just what I have been searching for.

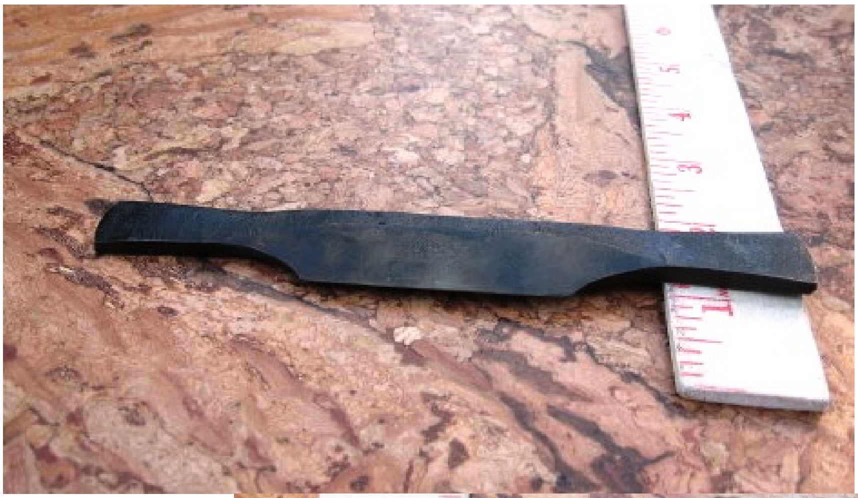
### Darrel's Drawknife

***Outdoors1*** In addition to knives and firestarters, Darrel makes a variety of useful outdoors/survival tools. One that I had a particular interest in trying is a small drawknife. I ordered one and showed to Schwert, who ordered one of his own.

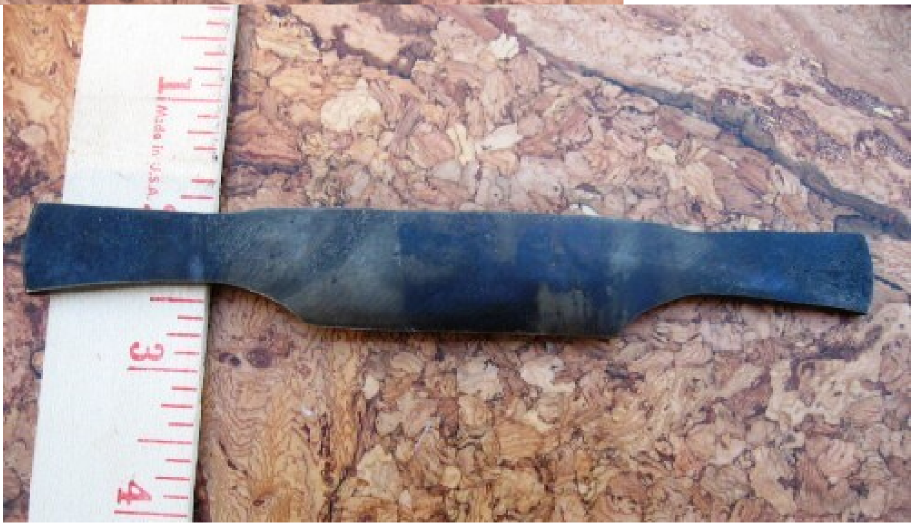


**Drawknife as delivered**

The two drawknives arrived forged and ground, but not sharpened. The edges had been cleaned up, but not honed. I prefer this in a tool, as I can modify the bevels and sharpen to my preferences. Both bevels on the drawknives were convex ground.



**Drawknife top bevel**

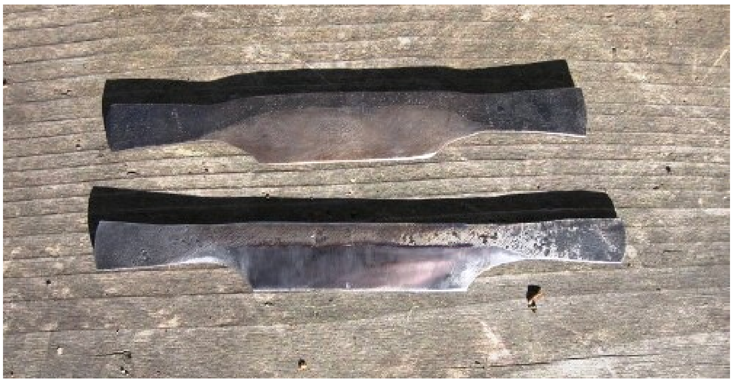


**Drawknife reverse bevel**

**Sharpening**

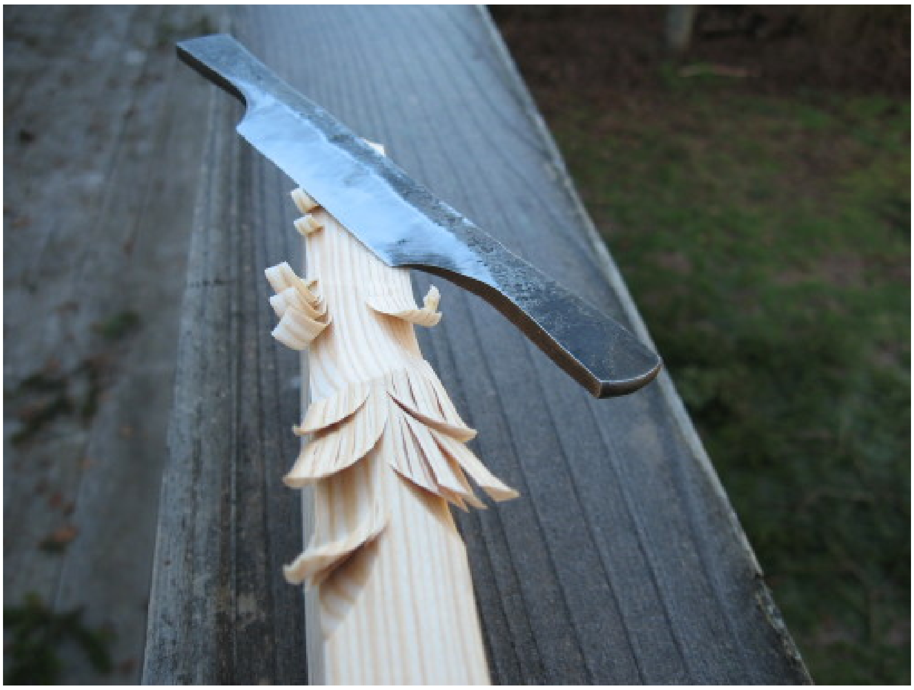
I started by polishing the convex lower edge on my belt grinder - this only took a few minutes. Then I stropped it on a leather strop loaded with chromium oxide. Cutting performance was much improved - Now I had an edge that would cut paper, but was still robust enough to carve large chips from a softwood board. At this point, the drawknife was ready to go.

I have read in a number of woodworking books that the ideal grind for a drawknife is to have one side convex for removing a lot of wood, and the other ground flat for planing. I have two other drawknives, but both edged ground the same. Darrel's little drawknife gave me the perfect opportunity to test the conventional wisdom on this score. The knife was small and straight edged, so grinding a flat edge with simple tools was feasible. The flattening was easily accomplished with a wooden board (about 3" wide) and some sandpaper. The results are shown below.



**Before and After** The top drawknife is Schwert's as delivered. The bottom drawknife is mine, shown after sharpening and flattening the top bevel.

I was surprised to find that while the little drawknife still cuts very well, flattening the top bevel appeared to make little difference in cutting flat surfaces. I may play around with it some more - perhaps grind a slight hollow on this top surface, but the tool functions very well after a simple sharpening.



**Drawknife in use** After sharpening, the little drawknife is capable of taking fine shavings, or deep roughing cuts to remove a lot of material.

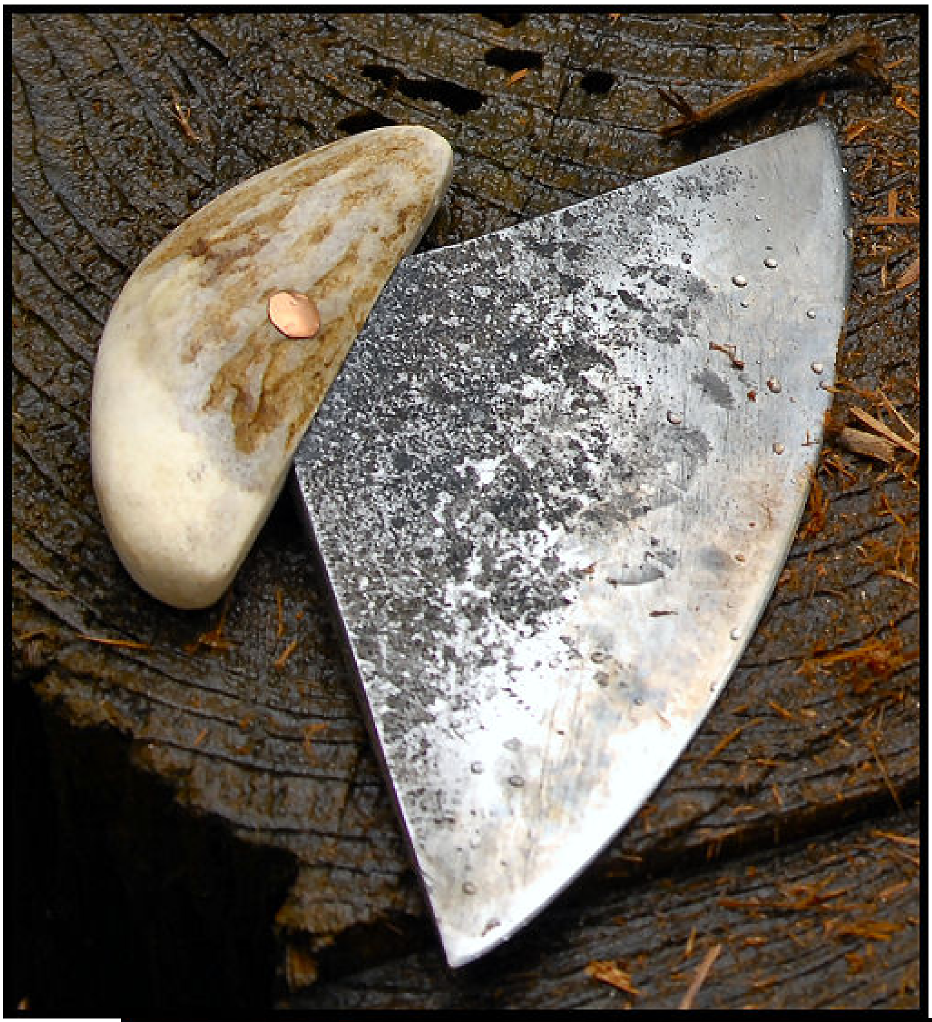
**Evaluation:**

Darrel's drawknife had a few advantages over the traditional drawknives. First the size makes it handy for packing in a kit. I have several larger drawknives. These knives are larger so they can do larger scale work, and they have comfortable handles. Unfortunately, larger drawknives are either too big or the handles make them too awkward to pack in a camping kit. Secondly, the simple carbon steel in Darrel's drawknife is easy to maintain. Third, Darrel's tool is properly heat treated and tempered - something getting increasingly rare in modern tools. As you can see in the photo, the blade has been hardened and tempered to the bonze color you find on good woodworking tools. The back appears tempered to a more resilient blue color, which provides more shock resistance. This describes exactly what I want in a tool - an edge hard enough to stay sharp, but sturdy enough for heavy use. Darrel's drawknives are also quite inexpensive, so you can tinker with the edges and bevels to your heart's content and not fear great financial loss. Finally, Darrel's knife appeals to my sense of history. It is an item that a native American or early frontiersman would have instantly recognized and have felt comfortable with.

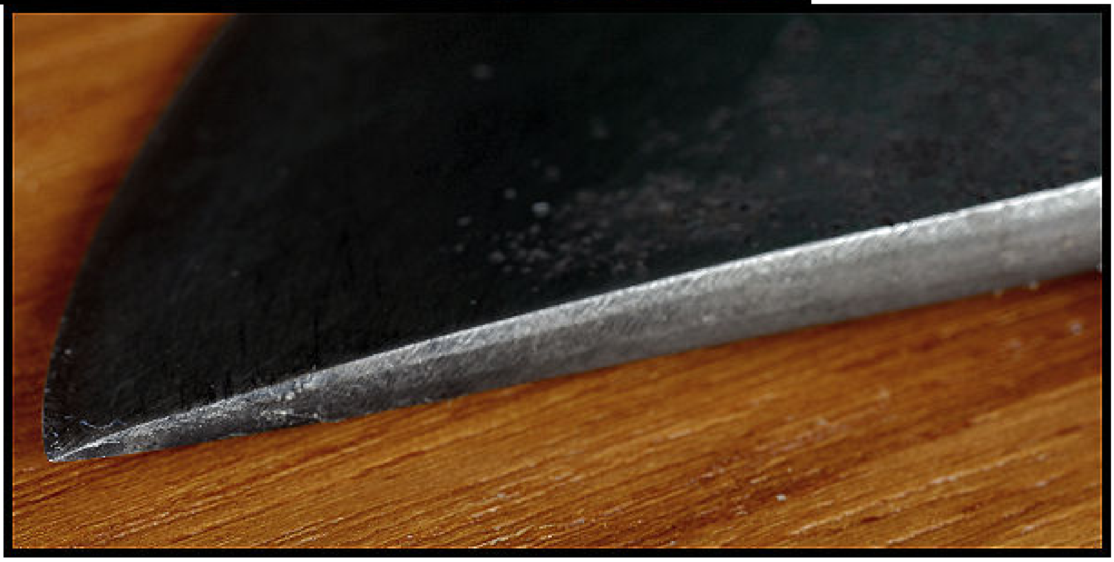
***Schwert*** Well I waited until Outdoors1 sharpened and worked with his drawknife before attempting any changes to mine. It was delivered ready to sharpen, and now after seeing what Outdoors1 has done, I think I am going to just attempt to follow his lead. I will have to do all my edge work with manual tools, sandpaper and stones, but otherwise will try for a similar edge profile. This little drawknife should come in very handy on many of the smaller wood carving projects I have going.

**Darrel's Ulus**

***Schwert*** This is a non-conformist ulu in that it is forged from 5160 spring steel instead of cut from hand or band saw steel as is the norm for most current northern ulus. It is very heavy in comparison to any of my Maynard Linder ulus which can be seen in my article here at the magazine. The blade is about 3/16th of an inch thick at the handle, and tapers to the very sharp convex edge.  This one has a Moose antler handle and Darrel made a nice leather sheath for it.

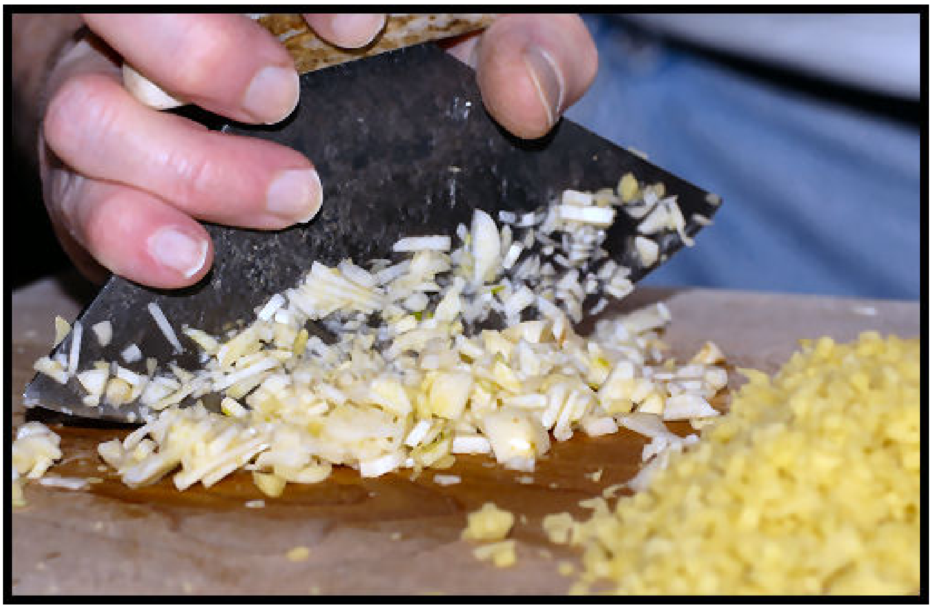


**Darrel Aune Ulu**



**Ulu Side View Taper**

Outdoors1 bought one of these ulus from Darrel, and once I saw how very different it was from the traditional types, I simply had to get one.  My version is a near twin to Outdoors1's.  While I think it is a bit less suited for all-around-general-purpose kitchen work in comparison to my Linder Fish River, it does have a great feel and balance, and for certain kitchen operations it is superior.



**Aune ulu** Schwert's ulu mincing garlic and ginger

This ulu works very well for thin push slices of meats and cheeses. Held crosswise between thumb and fingers for mincing it absolutely "rocks" (had to get that pun in). The mass of this ulu really shines when it comes to mincing. The very sharp convex edge combined with the weight makes walking this ulu through such things as garlic, ginger or herbs just a joy to use. Some folks use a wooden bowl for herb chopping, but I find a flat board and "walking" the edge through the herbs to be much easier and faster. Chopping in a bowl I would hold the ulu in a claw grip and use an up-and-down chop motion, I always slice the ginger or garlic then just hold the ulu crosswise as demonstrated in the above photo and rock my way through the pile. The mass of this ulu really makes mincing easy.

This ulu does bind some on more dense vegetables like potatoes, especially when making larger cubes or quarters. However, when making thinner slices of dense vegetables it works quite well.

I generally use my ulus as general purpose kitchen tools so expect them to assist with many more operations than just slicing or mincing. A very sharp ulu makes an excellent bread dough slasher and the basic ulu shape is perfect for use as a food scoop or dough scraper/lifter.

**Ulu Slashed Sourdough Round**

Sourdough is one of my standard baking operations and I use my ulus whether I am making bread or something a bit fancier.

**Aune ulu** Schwert's ulu with Sourdough Sponge

When I make my sourdough cinnamon rolls the dough is usually quite sticky. I roll it out on a glass plate and an ulu as a dough scraper and lifter is especially handy. For this operation my ulu is used as a spreader, a scraper to assist rolling, cutter and lifter of the soft sugar stuffed rolls to the pan.

**Ulu spreading butter** Sourdough Cinnamon Rolls

**Ulu as dough scraper** Sourdough Cinnamon Rolls

**Ulu as roll cutter and lifter** Sourdough Cinnamon Rolls

Darrel's ulu worked quite well in this role. I expected it to be a bit too thick for this operation, but it surprised me. It's robust edge did not dull on the glass plate either.

This ulu now has an honored place beside my thinner Maynard Linder ulus in the kitchen drawer. For more about sourdough see my article here.

Since Darrel supplied an excellent sturdy sheath for this ulu, I decided that it should be looked at as more than a camp kitchen or home kitchen tool. Fire prep is one role that this particular ulu design works at. Its convex edge and stoutness makes cedar bark scraping and splintering easy and natural.

**Cedar Bark Scrapings with Ulu**

**Cedar Bark Tinder Nest**

Shaving dry sticks for kindling and making feather sticks is definitely possible with this ulu.  It is not quite as easy as using a small hand ax or knife but possible.

**Ulu shavings and fuzz stick**

The ulu also serves as a nice scraper to "nest" up the shaveing and bark to form the tinder nest.

Overall, this ulu an excellent food prep tool and a useful fire prep tool.

***Outdoors1*** Schwert's cooking is making me hungry!  I had a chance to use my ulu quite as bit over the holidays.  I found this ulu to be a great knife for chopping in the kitchen.  It doesn't bother me that the blade is more robust than the Linder ulus, in fact I like that.

**Darrel Aune's ulu is a handy chopper for the kitchen**

It strikes me that Darrel's ulu might be closer to one that an Inuit woman would have had a blacksmith make during the early contact period.  It had the mass of the original stone knives, but the easily maintained edge of steel.  I expect it would have been considered a prized possession in any village.

I think the more robust construction would also be a benefit for other traditional uses - scraping or fleshing hides, for example.  The thinner ulus are (I would think)  to flexible for that sort of work.  Now, I don't have much need for a hide scraper/flesher, but I think it's neat that Darrel's blade could perform that function, if needed.

Another use of the heavier ulu is processing cedar bark for a tinder nest.  While any knife would work for this, the ulu shape makes chopping the bark easy.  This is a task I would not do with a thinner bladed ulu - I would be too afraid to damage the fine edge.

**Tinder Preparation** Ulu with chopped and sliced pieces of cedar bark

Chopped western red cedar bark makes a fine tinder.

**Ulu tinder prep 2**

Here's the Aune ulu with shredded cedar bark and mayawood.

aand one last photo.  The more I work with this ulu, the better it feels.  Here it is shaving some fine tinder for the fire.

**Ulu shaving tinder** Darrel's ulu can make fine shavings from this cedar bark

**Darrel's Knife**

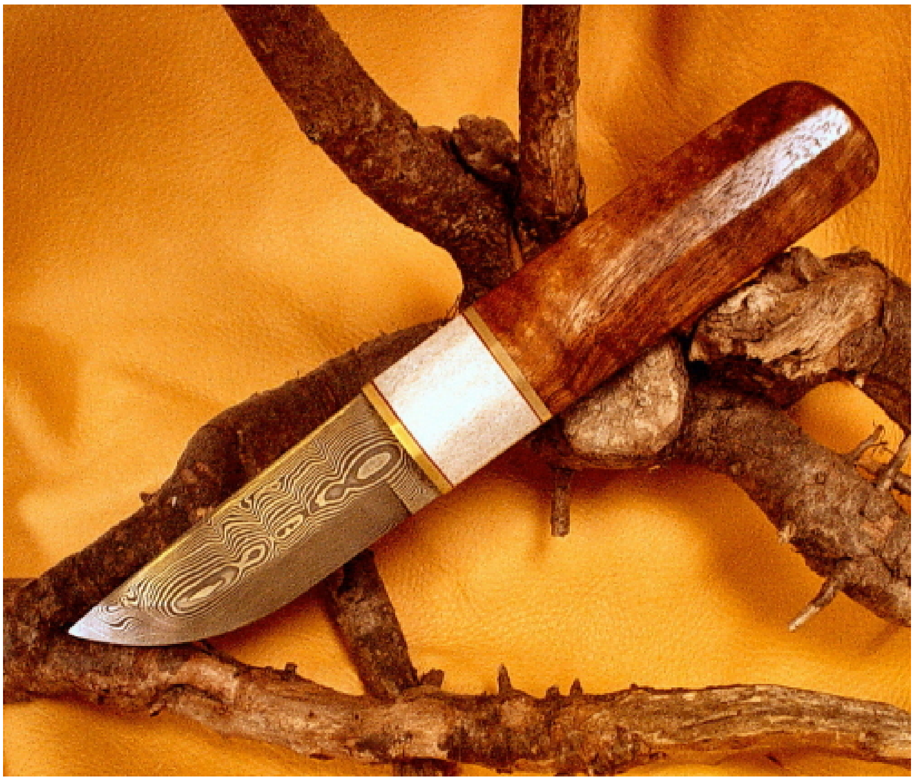
***Outdoors1*** The last item in this article came about after I asked Darrel about making a knife for me.  His website showed several styles, all of which looked practical and attractive.  My intent was to provide Darrel with the basic outline of the knife I wanted, and let his imagination fill in the details.

My outline was pretty simple: I wanted a Scandinavian style blade (rat tail tang), wood handle, and a leather sheath.

I had suggested 1095 as a good high carbon steel for the project, since I know many smiths like this steel for forge work and it is readily available.  Darrel asked if I was sure I wanted 1095, as he had something in mind that he thought I would like.  I said whatever he had in mind would be fine.

As you can see in the photo, Darrel's "something I would like" was very special indeed.  Here's is how Darrel described the final product over at PaleoPlanet.

The blade is 5160 & 52100, and is 3 1/4 inch long 3/16 thick and about an inch wide. The knife is 8 1/2 inches long overall with a white tail deer antler and Koa wood handle with red fiber & brass spacers. The handle is done with a diamond cross section and feels real nice in the hand with great balance.



**Darrel Aune Scandi** Photo by Becky Aune

**Evaluation:**

There are three characteristics that (for me) define a good woods knife.  First, A good knife requires good steel.  The 5160 and 52100 steels Darrel used for this knife are high carbon spring steel, eminently suitable for a working knife.  The steel appears to be properly hardened and tempered.  Throughout the testing, the blade kept its edge well and required nothing more that a touch up on a leather strop.  In addition, the deep etching makes for an attractive damascus pattern.

Second, the way a knife feels in your hand is essential to good knife use. Balance on the Aune Scandi is excellent.

**Aune Scandi** Thsi knife balances well in the hand

Third, a good woods knife requires a good sheath to carry it. The sheath provides safety for the owner, and also secures the blade against loss. Darrel provided a sturdy leather sheath with this knife. The knife fits snugly into the welted and waxed sheath, and there is little chance of losing it.

**Scandi knife and sheath** A handy package for the outdoors

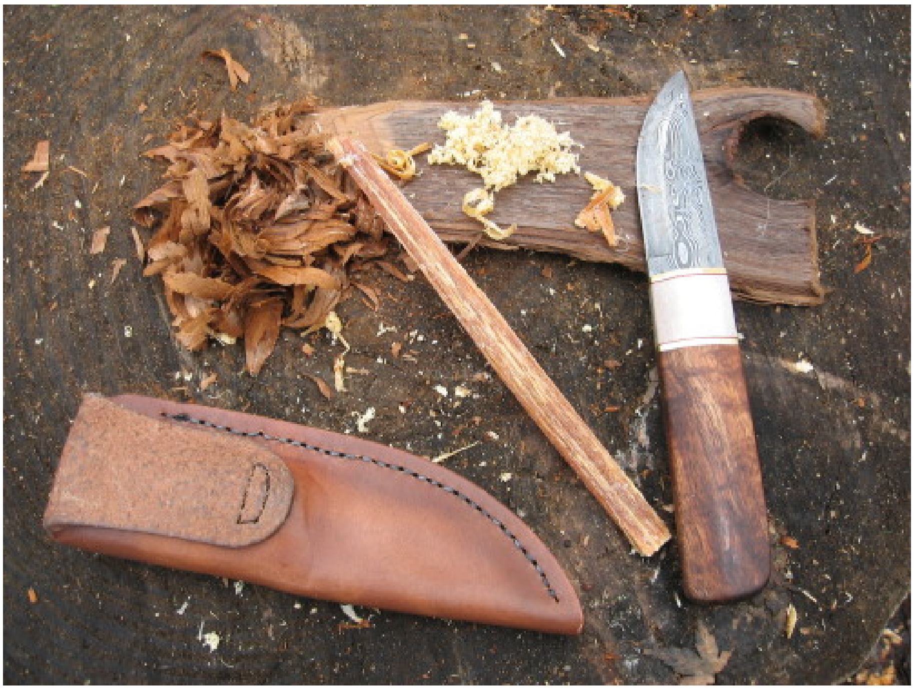
Below I've provided a brief field test of the knife and a few pictures of the Aune Scandi in use. I tried to concentrate on tasks that a knife is actually called upon to perform in the woods, rather than the torture testing one sometimes sees in knife tests.

Firemaking is an essential camp task for my field knives. The Aune knife had no problem preparing a variety of tinder materials for the firepit.

**Scraping** The scandi made short work of shaving mayawood for tinder

**Cedar bark** Shaving cedar for tinder was also no problem

**Cutting feather sticks** Darrel's knife also performed this task flawlessly



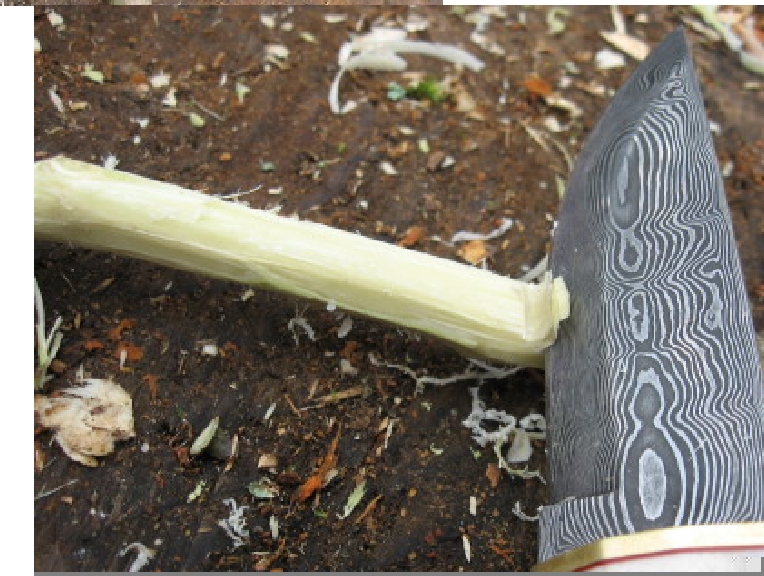
**Tinder ready to go!**

Another typical outdoor use is cutting sticks for a trap (or for roasting a sausage!). Here is the Aune Scandi cutting a hazel wand.

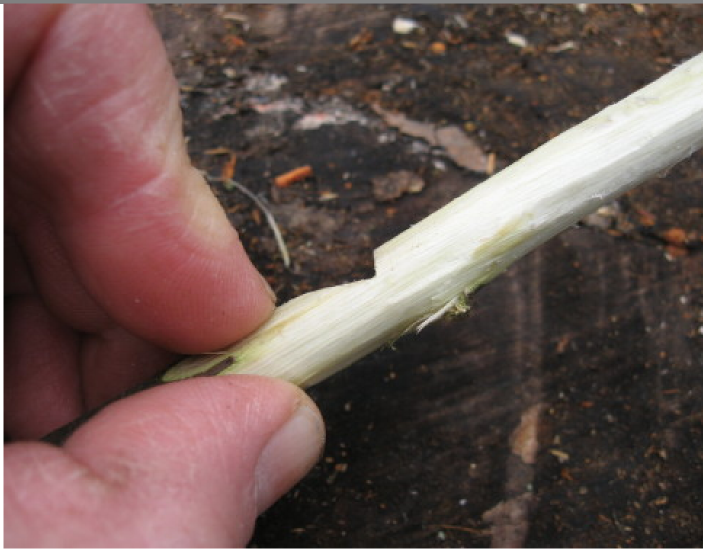
**Trimming a hazel wand**

Making a trap is another task that a knife might be called on to perform. The Aune Scandi had no problem cutting a stick to length, scraping the bark off, and carving a nice notch.

**Cutting the stick to length with a baton**



**Scraping bark and cutting a notch**



**notch** The finished notch has nice sharp corners

Food Preparation - it seems like no knife evaluation is complete without a trip to the kitchen. Here's one last photo of the Aune Scandi style knife.

**Food preparation** The scandi cuts nice, thin slivers of onion and ripe tomato.

The Aune Scandi had no problem slicing veggies for the camp kitchen. Heavier items (potatoes, carrots) might be more difficult do to the thicker blade stock.

In conclusion, Darrel Aune's Scandi provides a useful woods knife in a highly attractive package. The blade is made from high carbon steel, properly hardened and tempered. Balance is also excellent. The sturdy leather sheath carries the blade securely while protecting the user.

The blade is sturdy and sharp enough for most woods uses, and the shorter length makes for easy carry. The attractive natural materials in the handle provide a secure grip, and nicely contrast the damascus blade. All in all, Darrrel has provided a beautiful and practical package that I will treasure on many future trips.

**Conclusion**

***Schwert*** While this brings us to an end of the selection of tools we have, it is likely that a handful of new tools and certainly new designs have appeared on Darrel's sites. His imagination for things like the animal shaped firesteels and his skill at rendering these into useful and functional pieces of art is what makes him one of those amazing finds. I appreciate the designs, but design without function just does not make a tool. Darrel can obviously do both. His work is well worth seeking out, and challenging him to produce something new but useful seems to likely produce even more interesting and unique pieces. Darrel is one of those guys I am glad to have found.

Return to Part 1.

**Resources and Additional Material**

Darrel Aune's Primal Connection his general website.

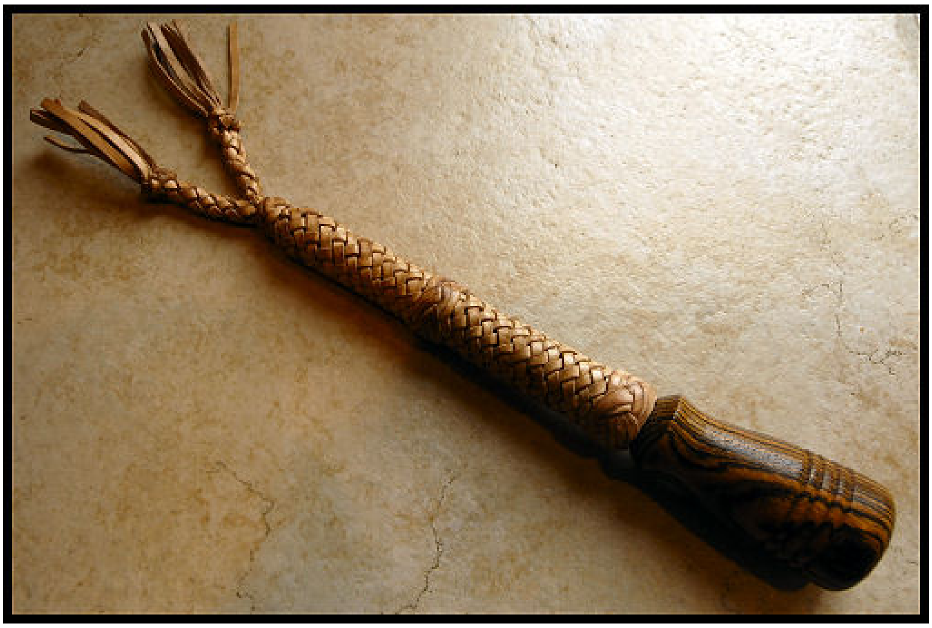
Darrel has two ebay stores, one for firepistons and one for his forge works.

Darrel Aune's FirePistons-R-Us Ebay Store

Darrel Aune's Primative Forge Works Ebay Store

Paleo Planet ForumWhere Darrel Aune is a frequent poster in the metalworking and other forum sections.

**Schwert** I made a sheath for both of these Aune awls.  I used a rawhide core covered with kangaroo braid.



The making of this sheath can be found in my pictorial article, DogBone Awl Sheath.

*Post-scriptum :*

*Version 1.7 2/5/2007 Part 2 Steel split*

*V. 1.7.1  3/22/07 Replaced some pix and proofed text*

*Version 2.0 3/22/2007 Almost there*

*Version 2.5 4/3/2007 Final review*

*Version 2.6 4/4/2007 Fini*

*Version 2.7 4/6/2007 Link to awl sheath added*